

Crafts and Arts in Estonia



Published by the Estonian Institute, 2004

ISBN 9985-9509-1-7

Designed by Piia Ruber

Acknowledgements:

Merike Alber, Mare Hunt, Anu Jõesaar, Tiina Kala, Lea Kõiv, Eeva Käsper-Lennuk, Kai Maser, Ave Matsin, Maiken Mündi, Mirja Ots, Inna Põldsam, Kaljo Põllu, Jana Ratas, Elmar Reisenbuk, Kärt Summatavet, Maret Tamjärv, Ülle Tamla, Ketli Tiitsaar, Liina Veskimägi; Ants Laikmaa Museum, Art Museum of Estonia, E. Strauss Ltd. (Avinurme), Estonian Folk Art and Craft Union, Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design, Centre of Archaeology (Estonian Institute of History), Estonian Open Air Museum, Museum Europäischer Kulturen (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin), Rocca-al-Mare School, Setu Farming Museum, Tallinn City Archives, Tallinn City Museum, Tartu Art College, Viljandi Culture Academy

Special thanks for illustrations to Anu Ansu, Vaike Kajak and Arp Karm

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Crafts and Arts

in Estonia

Past and Present

Vaike Reemann and Piret Õunapuu



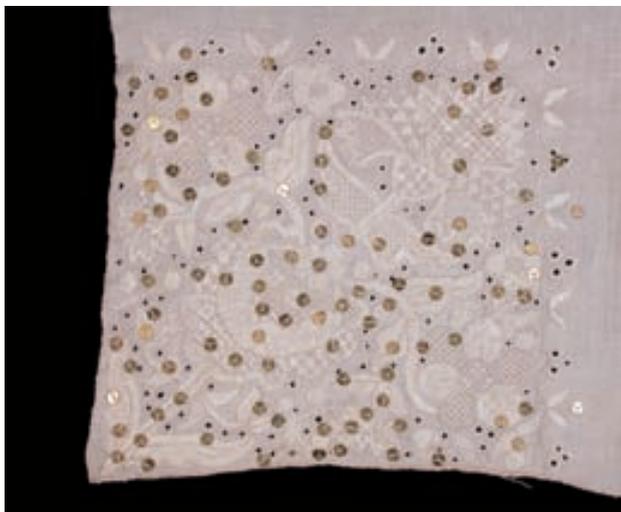


Watercolour of a coif ornament from Tarvastu (see map on the inside of the back cover)

Museums in Estonia are filled to the brim with examples of handicraft from the past that we tend to label 'folk art'. The men and women who once produced these things knew nothing about museums or the concept of folk art – these terms were devised by modern scholarly thought. We appreciate and systematise and try to figure out the connections between people and artefacts, which regrettably slip gradually further out of our reach and become all the harder to understand. The original causes and effects are pushed aside by present-day suppositions. We do, after all, explain and decode in a system of signs that we can comprehend ourselves.

Thus it may happen that we overlook the most simple explanations: they made their pretty clothes, work tools, textiles or other useful artefacts both for observing focal points in their lives as well as for everyday use; they got married and celebrated weddings; they covertly compared their homespun lap robes and sleigh-blankets with those of their neighbours, or embroidered white patterns on white linen in a dark room lit only by the dim light from the flame of a wooden splinter.

'Fake' artefact of dubious taste or a touch of Estonian self-irony? In addition to the state decorations of the Republic of Estonia, Roman Tavast's workshop provided several curious products for Estonian handicraft enthusiasts to debate over.



Embroidered kerchief from Türi



Silver stein by Roman Tavast's goldsmith's workshop in Tallinn (1930s).

To show his love for a woman, a man would carve patterns on an engagement gift for her – this might be an ordinary laundry bat that pounded coarse work-trousers in the wash trough or was left soaking in soapy water.

If we concentrate on the general conception of the world of the crafter and the motivation behind his or her creativity, we can discard all debates on whether we are dealing with 'applied art' or simply 'handicraft'. It is this approach that could help us once again to focus on the artefacts themselves and perhaps offer a glimpse of their forgotten hidden message.



Päikesevene ('Boat of the Sun'; mezzotinto, 1974) from the cycle *Kodalased* ('Ancient Dwellers') by Kaljo Põllu

The origins

The Estonians like to think of themselves as one of the most ancient settled native peoples in Europe. Starting from the arrival of the earliest human inhabitants at the end of the last ice age, about 10 000 years or 400 generations ago, until the second half of the 20th century, there is no evidence of any significant wave of immigration. People naturally moved to and from Estonia during and after various disasters – wars, epidemics, famines, etc. – but the Estonians' peasant village settlement usually absorbed the foreigners in the course of a few generations.



The persistence of the mentality of the native people is also reflected in the fact how often the *memes* inherited from their reindeer-hunting ancestors crop up in the expressions of collective self-consciousness of today's quite urbanised Estonians.

It is the ancient artefacts unearthed by archaeologists that have originally served as both example and inspiration for the 'antediluvian' images of a water bird or world tree that keep sneaking into modern Estonian applied art and handicraft. Apparently, however, an even more substantial role has been played by such leading 'promoters of national mythology' as artist Kaljo Põllu, or writer and film-maker Lennart Meri, who have taken pains to disclose the meaning hidden in the age-old patterns to their countrymen.



Comb Pottery
Potsherd with waterfowl ornament from Lommi
Reconstruction of a pot from Jägala



Kaik kerdub ('Everything repeats itself'; tapestry, 2001) by Anneli Vassar



Doorknocker of the Great Guild of Tallinn

Traditions of urban handicraft

The first colonial period in the history of Estonia, following the conquest of the land in 13th century by Danish and German crusaders, up till 20th century, knows several parallel handicraft traditions. Firstly there were the utilitarian crafts of commoners in towns and peasants in the country that showed little variation and mostly only satisfied the everyday household needs. Besides that we have the work of numerous journeymen busy at the manorial complexes of the landed gentry and at larger monasteries, and, most importantly, the guild members and independent artisans in towns – all introduced novel techniques and other type of innovations.



Keys to the doors of Tallinn's wall towers and wall gates

In the 14th century, a mere three or four generations after the arrival of the first German colonists, the biggest town in Estonia at the time, Tallinn (Reval), boasted more than 50 lines of handicraft. Most artisans worked with metal (black-, silver- and goldsmiths, swordsmiths and locksmiths, kettlesmiths, saw-makers, pewterers) and leather (shoemakers, saddlers, tanners, furriers). During the heyday of the Hanseatic League in the 15th century, there were artisans representing 73 different areas of craftsmanship active in Tallinn.

While all this looks quite similar to the history of crafts in the rest of Europe, one must not overlook a rather significant difference. Throughout most of the post-conquest period – from the medieval times up till as late as 1870s – the social divisions of Estonian society coincided quite precisely with a division according to nationality.

'Pocket-shaped' pendant lock

Door lock



Estonians, always an overwhelming majority, comprised the peasantry in countryside as well as the under-privileged labour force and practitioners of less prestigious trades in towns. Higher ranks in the social hierarchy, ecclesiastic as well as secular, were occupied by non-Estonians – mostly Germans and, from the end of 19th century until the foundation of the Republic of Estonia in 1918, increasingly Russians.

The *Deutschbalten* (German 'Baltic Germans' – the clergy, nobility, merchants and artisans; later also intelligentsia or *literati*) retained close contacts with their forefathers' land of origin and through that with the rest of Europe. Thus new handicraft techniques (via itinerant journeymen and apprentices), items (by way of merchants) or patterns (copied from life or pattern guides) originating in Italy or France, or spreading from the Orient, often quickly found their way to Estonian towns, manor houses and vicarages. What prevented them from spreading widely in the countryside was the static mentality of *maarahvas* (from Estonian *maa* 'land, country, Estonia' + *rahvas* 'people') who clung on to their old types of adornments for generations, maintained their sacred places over the centuries or stuck to the same patterns for millennia.



Cooper Elmar Reisenbuk from Avinurme cutting a croze with a grooving knife



Grooving knife from the 19th c.

Croze saws, the usual tools in European cooperage, were widely used by Estonia's urban craftsmen from the Middle Ages onwards. In the country, on the other hand, their place was taken, throughout the time when wooden vessels dominated, by grooving knives. In addition to Estonia, these tools were typical of Scandinavia, Northern Latvia and Ingria.



Croze saw from Aiboland (1887)



Cooper Jaan Pent's croze saw (early 20th c.)



Traditional skirts from the collection of the Estonian National Museum



On the way home and Peasants dancing
by L. H. Petersen (1805–95)

To show off one's clothes, people often had to cut corners elsewhere – there was a saying in the Tartu-Maarja parish: "What's in your tummy remains untold, but what you're wearing is there for all to behold."

Estonian women going to church by
A. G. Pezold (1794–1859)



The poor living standard of Estonians caused a situation where a peasant could not see much sense in decorating his home. Both the land and the buildings belonged to the manor, and the landlord decided how long one could remain under the same roof. Furthermore, it would have been quite pointless to decorate the rooms of the low and chimney-less building – with the light coming through tiny 'windows' covered by pig-bladder, hardly anything could be seen in the smoky half-light. The household furniture was, consequently, meagre and extremely austere. There was not much stuff around.

Apt in adjusting to circumstances, Estonians directed their attention to life outside the home: they were particularly keen on travel wraps and sleigh-blankets, the multitude of gifts that the bride presented to wedding guests – *veimed* – as well as on an array of everyday items that were used outside the house. This is most vividly expressed in the time-consuming effort put into making the colourful and diligently adorned traditional costumes.





A major change occurred in Estonian rural life after the 1860s; this was when peasants started to purchase land ('reclaim' the land forfeited by their forefathers, as most Estonians felt) and property, the period of National Awakening and the transition towards urban ideals. This was also when a new motto: "Be a master in your own house", was adopted. For decorating their homes, people took to manufacturing or purchasing artefacts they had not even heard of before. The efforts that had previously been directed at embellishing 'ritual objects' for the outside world to see, were gradually channelled into improving everyday domestic life.



From that time onwards, handcraft in a variety of tastes confirmed itself as a natural and appreciated part of Estonian interiors, both at home and in office.



By the end of the 19th century, what might be called 'national handcraft' began taking shape – one of the tangible results of the emergence of ethnic self-consciousness among Estonians. 'Traditional' handicrafts became 'national' when the user had developed a sufficient distance from the previous connotations. While any countryman, at the time of the change of century, still enjoyed sipping his beer from a traditionally crafted wooden beer mug (regarding it, quite naturally, as the most suitable vessel for such a purpose, not as something particularly 'national'), his educated son, a first generation townsman, placed a similar stein on his desk, seeing it as a pretty Estonian artefact.





The first collectors looking for the beautiful handcraft articles made by their ancestors started their rounds of Estonian villages roughly at the same time. Early in the 20th century, the idea of founding 'a museum for our own national things' cropped up repeatedly, and such an institution eventually came into being under the name *Eesti Rahva Muuseum* (Estonian National Museum) in 1909. To this day, the museum serves people as a place to find examples and inspiration.



'Antiques' donated to the Museum during nation-wide collecting tours in 1900–11

At the same time much of what had emerged in peasant culture during several centuries disappeared from everyday use or acquired completely new functions. While, for example, the festive and church clothes from different periods gradually turned into 'national costumes', everyday work clothes woven and sewn at home had already disappeared in many places by the end of the 19th century. Part of the handcraft tradition faded away because the items involved had lost their original function – in the approaching era of goods produced by machines and bought in shops, the crafts of making birch tar or bast shoes were inevitably doomed.

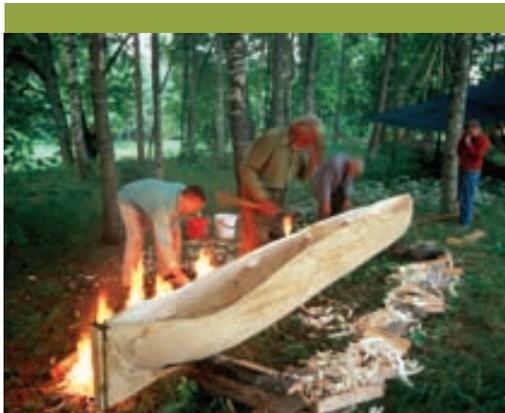


The decline of handcraft skills was partly due also to 'social anachronisation': the purchased piece of clothing, for instance, was not necessarily of finer quality or even cheaper; for a tradition to vanish it was often enough for the urban fashions to reach a place.

Estonian National Museum's storage facilities



Still, part of the ancient skills have managed to survive the 'low point of consumption' and sprung to new life, either meeting the demands for modern-time souvenirs or thanks to other reasons, in the very start of 21st century.



The return of the dugouts

One of the most conspicuous achievements in the field of revival of ancient crafting traditions, is the skill of hollowing out canoes from a single trunk of aspen or linden tree. In Estonia, the use of dugouts (*haabjas* in Estonian, from *haab* 'aspen') continued up until modern times in areas with regularly flooding rivers or deltas with large reed-beds. In Soomaa (lit. 'Land of Mires') in the south-west, local enthusiasts have succeeded in tracking down a couple of old master-crafters and established dugout-carving summer camps where young townspeople can re-establish contact with the millennia-old tradition of their ancestors. To take your mates or sweetheart on a ride in a canoe carved out of a tree trunk by your own hands, must more than compensate for several weeks of hard labour.



Despite the extinction of many original craft traditions – or, ironically, rather because of that – 'our' and 'national' have become, during the last one hundred years or so, a true fashion of its own in Estonia. Among the most prominent examples of the trend are the Arts and Crafts influenced manifestations of the early 20th century Estonian National Romanticism – inspired by the examples of Finland and Scandinavia and adopted to compensate for the lack of shining heroes in the nation's history.



The 'artist's house' of Ants Laikmaa, one of the earliest and most famous Estonian artists, completed in the late 1920s in Taebla in West Estonia, is an impressively integral example of the Estonian National Romanticism in good taste.





In times of political difficulties, in particular, everything 'national' has easily provided moral support. The harsher the everyday reality, the more strength the surrounding artefacts have afforded to reaffirm the spirit of being Estonian.

Both the founding (in 1918) and restoration (in 1991) of the Republic of Estonia, in particular, were heydays for 'national spirit expressed in items'. On occasions, it cannot be denied, this approach has resulted in rather grotesque manifestations.



A china statuette depicting a stylised woman's costume of Hiiumaa, made by Estonian émigrés in Sweden.

Oddly enough, the people who have perhaps cherished the Estonian handicraft tradition the most, live abroad. For tens of thousands of Estonians persuaded or forced to abandon their homeland during the 19th and 20th century, it has provided rare moments of solace, something from the past to cling to. From the Crimea to Patagonia, and from British Columbia to New South Wales, the way Estonian émigrés have interpreted and rendered the Estonian handicraft tradition has caused it to develop in a way of its own, resulting partly in fastidiously preserved 'still lifes' from the 19th century, partly in astonishing blends with local traditions.



Estonian settlers reached Abkhazia in the foothills of Caucasus, at the end of the 19th century. Since then, their rooms have acquired wall-hangings with mountain scenery in addition to the textiles with traditional Estonian geometric ornaments.

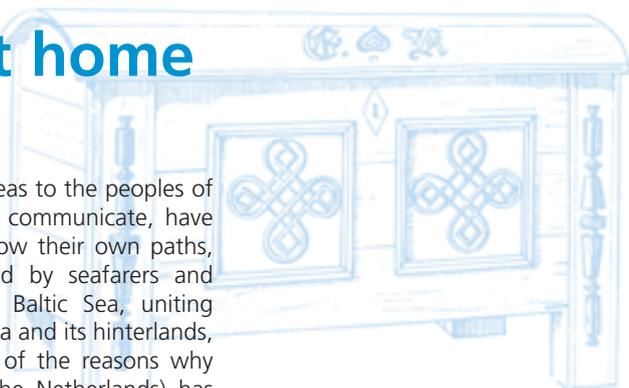
Back in Estonia, despite the ever increasing pace of urbanisation and the spread of 'ready-made' lifestyle, even today one can find a few locations – the island of Kihnu in the Gulf of Livonia and the district of Setumaa in the South-East corner of the mainland, to name two examples – where traditionally-made clothing as well as a variety of home-carved household items are still found in daily use.

Neighbours at home and abroad

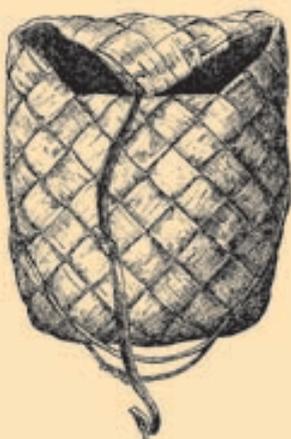
Cultural loans that have given fresh ideas to the peoples of the Old World, curious and eager to communicate, have throughout the ages preferred to follow their own paths, primarily favouring trade routes plied by seafarers and merchants. In Northern Europe, the Baltic Sea, uniting Western and Central Europe with Russia and its hinterlands, reigned supreme. This might be one of the reasons why Estonia (territorially no bigger than the Netherlands) has acquired such a wealth of different handicraft techniques and products compared with many a larger country on the same latitude.

Ethnographically speaking, Estonia straddles the 'watershed' of the two influential handicraft 'industries' – a transitional zone between the traditions of maritime Scandinavia and these of the more land-locked forest cultures of northern Eurasia. Local folk culture is full of loans and influences from both.

An item of handicraft, for example, that here has extended to the eastern edge of its distribution area, is the clothes chest with corner-pillar construction.



The clothes chest was a most significant piece of furniture in a peasant household, accommodating lots of painstakingly made garments. The finely ornamented chests, besides providing protection for treasures and a delight to the eye, were also important symbols of wealth.



On the other hand, a large part of woodcraft techniques can be found in Estonia on the western border of their zone of distribution – further west there is no knowledge of weaving bast shoes or birch-bark utensils.





Handicraft of Mulgimaa, in many ways the most inward-looking region of Estonia, has preserved various features from the Middle Ages (probably 11th–13th centuries), such as patterns with shoots of *arbor vitae* (Tree of Life), circles with inserted crosses and octagonal stars (benediction crosses and stars of felicity from Gothic Art), as well as clothes with archaic cut – wrap-skirts and longcoats.

The frontier between those two spheres of influence largely coincides with the border separating Lower Estonia (Western Islands and the depressions that rose from the one-time seabed of the country's western and north-western parts) and Higher Estonia (elevations and plains of the country's East and South).

The best arable lands are located in Higher Estonia and, consequently, a more homogeneous peasant culture developed there. Adversely, in comparison to the rest of the country, under the circumstances of serfdom that became fully established in Estonia in the 18th century, this meant tougher rents and labour dues in that area; and thus even more unbearable living conditions. That is why the scholars who took an interest in the life of rural population in the 19th century, often found the most conservative culture – quite closed to outside influence – in the more fertile regions of Higher Estonia.



Although limiting the outside influence, it was, paradoxically, this very same closedness that also contributed to the variety. Living in isolation (Estonian peasants did not acquire full rights to re-settle and move around until as late as 1863) a great number of parishes or even separate villages developed their own sets of items.



In 1918, Helmi Reiman-Neggio, the first university-educated Estonian ethnologist, summarised this recognition as follows:

.../ Because this truth must be clear to anyone who examines our antiques: however flat and even our country is geologically, thereby favourable to all movement and communication geographically: the history of its inhabitants, however, has proceeded as if insurmountable Alpine mountain ridges separated one parish from another, one village from the other. Such modest mutual influence regarding the everyday items between people living so close to one another is something to be marvelled at. Even neighbouring villages went their own way as far as national costumes are concerned, and at church it was easy to recognise a woman's birthplace by her coif.

In my own parish Kolga-Jaani, for example, the Oiu women walked around with huge white wheel coifs. In the nearby Otiküla they wore nicely curved coifs like a rooster's feather. People in the neighbouring Oorgu made do with much humbler, hemstitch-topped coif, and in Parika village Karula's tulle-topped 'soft coifs' were in vogue. And yet it is a mere 22 versts (i.e. about 23.5 km) from Oiu to Parika village, and even less by taking the paths across the mires. .../

Life was different in Estonian border areas where over the centuries various fragments of people settled in search of a better life, or fleeing from persecution. The newcomers often retained relations with their homeland and thus introduced much that was new into the everyday life of Estonians.



In Eastern Estonia there are the Russian Old Believers who fled religious persecution and settled at the Estonian side of Lake Peipsi from the end of 17th century; but also the Setus, Orthodox South Estonians of Petserimaa. Among other, less known novelties, these people introduced red cotton yarn in the embroidery of Estonian festive clothes, as well as the saw-patterned decorative carvings – 'wooden lace' – used on the houses built in many Estonian towns in the period around 1900.



Runic calendar
from the Pakri
Islands



The other influential minority group was made up of Swedish-speaking fishermen, seal hunters and seamen, who enjoyed ancient privileges from the times of their earliest settlements on the Western Islands and Coast in the 13th–14th centuries. In 1940–4, virtually the entire community fled to Sweden to escape WW II, but for seven previous centuries the people of *Aiboland* – the collective name of Swedish settlements in Estonia – introduced their Estonian countrymen to many a new costume fashion, fishing tool and calendar rite.

Closeness of the maritime routes of communication made also Estonians of the coastal areas more open and perceptive of the new than their inland contemporaries. Since the barren land could not feed the family, much of livelihood of the 'people of littoral', especially the islanders, came both from and across the sea – doing various jobs on the mainland or on board the ships. In Juminda on the northern coast, when farms could be bought from the landlords the peasants bluntly said: "Water will see to the debts!"



It is now probably impossible to ascertain which Baltic Sea nation introduced others to the ancient skills of making seaworthy rowing and sailing boats with over-lapping clinker-planking. Be it as it may, most of Estonian fishing boats are still built in this fashion that amply proved its worth in Viking times.



Yet, nor are those people much mistaken who claim that various handicraft techniques (and partly also ornamentation) are, at least in Europe, international phenomena, thus making it hopeless to try to distinguish anything uniquely ethnical for each nation. There is reason enough to argue that any analysis on the origin of loans and the path they have followed is doomed to failure. And that the peculiarity of each place is expressed in the interpretation of the main motifs – *i.e.* the treatment of material, usage of ornaments and colour, *etc.* – and naturally in the way all parts hold together in a culture.

Warm socks and mittens for winter

A craft that continues to carry on a tradition that comes perhaps closest to the terms 'genuine' and 'national' in Estonia is knitting, primarily because winter tends to be cold in these latitudes.

The Estonian knitting heritage is rich in design and lore – some patterns used for mittens, for instance, have been in continuous use from as far back as the 16th century right up to the present day. For ornamenting mittens and socks, both cloaking and colour patterning were used.

Local tradition knows more than two hundred mitten-patterns, most of which are connected with nature, especially with animals – e.g. 'polecat-paws', 'swallow-tail', 'bird-head', 'frog-thighs', 'elk-antler'. Although the majority of Estonians would probably not know the original name of the patterns or even their native parish, they would undoubtedly recognise the Estonianness of the ornaments right away.

Probably the most popular handicraft in Estonia, knitting has acquired more than one novel application in our rapidly changing times. Like in any such case, the success of this kind of innovation depends on the subtlety of taste and perception of the artisans involved.



Most of the women (and some of the men!) learn to crochet and knit quite early at school, and socks and mittens knitted by grandmother are a natural part of various winter wardrobes.



The positive example – to the mind of Estonians, at any rate – is the knitted toys with ancient patterns. Conceived in the Viljandi Culture Academy under the auspices of the today's Grand Old Lady of Estonian handicraft, Anu Raud, these creatures, mainly all kinds of animals, look truly cuddly and familiar. There is an inexplicable 'something' at work here that does not allow the result to appear ridiculous.





Nalbinding

The sources of the technique of making woollen mittens and socks with a single bone needle are lost in the prehistory in Estonia. Nalbound or needle-netted articles, usually felted, lasted for a long time – they were thicker and warmer, in comparison to knitwear, and were not liable to unravel. According to the folk tradition: “In olden times the devil unstitched all mittens, but he hadn’t a clue how to unstitch those.”



The oldest museum specimens of this kind of mittens date from the eleventh century. From about two centuries later (in spite of another saying: “Knit mittens – lazy wife”), knitting – faster, simpler and enabling patterning – began taking over from needlework.

People used needle-netted mittens less and less in daily life, and by the nineteenth century they had become simply an element at the rites of passage – wedding and funeral rituals. A mitten of that type was placed on the gift chest, or a pair of mittens in the coffin, in order to ward off evil.



In recent times, the nalbinding technique has been revived in Estonia: both professional artisans and laywomen use it as an interesting variation in equipping their families for winter.



Genuine souvenirs and the memorabilia-industry

In the circumstances of global holiday-making and increasingly mass-oriented commercial tourism the 'honest souvenirs' that still retain the craftsman's touch and the association with a certain place and culture in years to come, are becoming scarce – Estonia is no exception in this respect.

Tourist traps in Estonian towns and in the countryside offer a wide range of kitschy bric-a-brac, the sole purpose of which is, presumably, to be mementoes. Unfortunately, for many Estonians too, the concept 'Estonian souvenir' evokes, more often than not, precisely this type of quickly and sloppily made piece of so-called handicraft that is not actually meant to be used at all.

The authenticity of Estonian traditional handicraft has always been measured by its utility value. In peasant culture, the creative effort put into production and decoration could only be 'spent' on objects that were of actual use: articles to wear as clothing or for ornamentation, and protection, things to eat with or from, *etc.*

Luckily for visitors, many souvenirs to be found in today's Estonia, such as knitwear, wood- or leatherwork, still fall into the category. Pot coasters and butter knives made of juniper, for instance, represent the sort of items where the original material and old techniques have found a new function. These are wonderful artefacts, in spite of the fact that our ancestors never actually used them.



The invasion into handicraft of various alien characters offers rather fascinating examples of another kind of alienation, or else (depending on the point of view), the entirely natural process of borrowing. In Estonia, perhaps the strongest impact was that of Mickey Mouse way back in the 1930s and the mascot of the Moscow Olympic Games Mishka-the-Bearcub in the 1980s. Similar curiosities are still carved on and burnt into wooden cutting boards, woven into wall hangings and embroidered on sofa cushions.





Master potter's certificate of Daniel Bornschein (1787)



Welcome cup of the Tanners' Guild of Tallinn (Johann Georg Stier, 1730)

Transfer of the handicraft tradition

The survival of a tradition depends on honest and well-functioning instruction. An apprentice learning his craft under the supervision of a master, besides acquiring craft skills also learns the canons of taste and, on happier occasions, gains some secret wisdom to provide the things he makes with a soul.

In medieval craft guilds – which continued to 'govern the crafts' in Estonian towns until the end of 19th century – the instruction was meticulously organised, but at the same time jealously secretive and exclusive. In order to become a master the initiate had to first of all have the proper social background, then go through a lengthy period of apprenticeship – preferably involving the *Wanderjahre* ('wandering years') abroad – and finally present certain pieces of work approved by the guild.



Stein of the Furriers' Apprentices of Tallinn (Johann Georg Stier, 1720s–40s)



Not much is known, up till the 17th century, about the crafting traditions of the majority of the inhabitants of Estonia, the Estonian peasants. During the peak period of nobility's prosperity and grandeur in the late 18th to the early 19th century the interest of the Baltic German land-owners in educating them – in addition to elementary Bible reading and arithmetic skills – and improving their standard of life remained, some semi-legendary exceptions aside, quite limited.

Seal of the Coopers' Guild of Tallinn (1556)



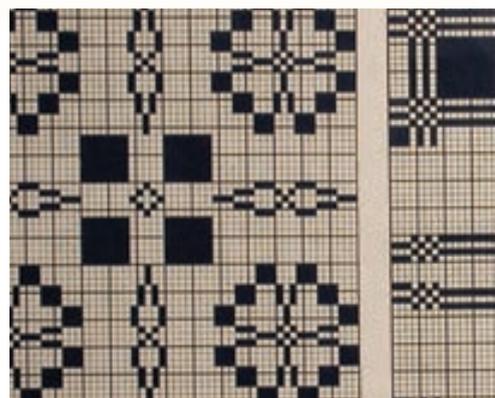


Frame chairs from the 19th century provide ample illustration for the imitation of urban and manorial furniture fashions (from Baroque to Chippendale and Biedermeier) by peasant craftsmen.

A major change only arrived together with the spread of the ideas of German Enlightenment and National Romanticism in Estonia in the 1800s. During their studies at Göttingen, Halle, Jena and other German universities many future manor-owners developed a sense of responsibility for the intellectual advancement of the peasantry back at home. The popular Estonian-language home economics' calendars and magazines were one of the results, as were handicraft instruction for the servants at the manor houses. It was through the coachmen, maids, stableboys and wet nurses that a good deal of the more refined patterns, fashions and crafting techniques spread from the manor to the general populace.

Thus, in the early 19th century, the fashion and styles – from Rococo to Empire style and Biedermeier – that for decades had remained more or less 'out-of-reach' as far as the peasants were concerned, now entered the Estonian consciousness, and found expressions in clothing, home decoration, *etc.* in a single eclectic wave.

Even more rapid changes accompanied the National Awakening in the 1860s. One of many signs of the emancipation of Estonian peasantry was the mushrooming of associations and societies of various sorts. Whether devoted nominally to agricultural improvement, the temperance movement, cycling sport, fire-fighting, or some other activity the authorities agreed to give their permission to, a significant part of the organisations' efforts was devoted to 'civilising' their fellow Estonians: by arranging various exhibitions, offering instruction about housekeeping and handicrafts, publishing educational literature, *etc.*





Ladies craft course in Järvamaa (1930s)

The new heyday of societies and the spread of popular handicraft skills arrived in the 1920s after Estonia became independent. In order to promote everything national, the new nation state added 'political commission' to already strong 'societal readiness'. Folk art, hitherto regarded as something lowly and vulgar, became the sign and manifestation of Estonian national ideas, to be introduced and taught to as many as possible.

In 1927, with strong governmental backing, the joint venture *Kodukäsitöö* ('Domestic Handicrafts') was established for commissioning, purchasing and trading (mostly exporting to the United States) the replica articles of traditional Estonian handicraft, mainly textiles.

Two years later, another central organisation, the Estonian Folk Art and Craft Union (EFACU), was founded, the aim of which was "... advancing handicraft at home, improving skills, promoting the idea and explaining its usefulness to a wider population..." The Union began publishing the magazine of applied art, handicrafts and household culture titled *Kodutööstus* ('Domestic Economics') in 1938.

The flourishing of handicraft cultivated in societies came to an abrupt end in 1940. After annexation of Estonia the Soviets quickly banned, amongst other things, all organisations that formed the backbone of Estonian civic society; the EFACU was disbanded as well.

Worst of all, in the first post-WW II decade, forced collectivisation together with mass deportations brought about the loss of many farm households and, consequently, the very 'foundations' of traditional rural handicraft.

In the 1950s women kept knitting mittens, socks and sweaters for their families, and the practically non-existent services compelled men to undertake various tasks of carpentry, etc. Their children, in the meantime, sawed stars and sheaves of rye out of plywood, or, at best, made snow shovels or bird feeders at school. Anything more refined by way of home culture was derided in public as manifestations of anti-Soviet bourgeois sentiment.



First issue of *Kodutööstus*

UKU

In Soviet Estonia, after the initial shock caused by the worst Stalinist repressions of the late 1940s to the early 1950s, cultivating national handicraft became a sort of protest against communist ideology that was preaching internationalism.

The central part in heritage protection was that of the Association of Handicraft Masters *UKU* (founded in 1966 and named after an Estonian household spirit), which consisted of the best craftsmen all over Estonia, and served as the banner for the production of Estonian souvenirs and household items in the national style. These masters – in 1970, 16 UKU branches operated all over Estonia, providing work to 1500 artisans – crafted artefacts either modelled on the originals deposited in various Estonian museums, or produced according to designs by modern artists in the style of folk art.

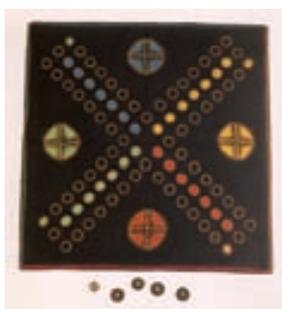


As the majority of craftsmen were spread throughout Estonia, their craft often conveyed a feeling of the essence and charm of where they lived. The more so, as a lot of their articles were made by using old techniques and tools.

The success of *UKU* products was increased by their affordability: they were popular gifts to friends at home and also abroad on the rare foreign visits.



Cloth slippers made in *UKU* after an example of festive footwear from the Island of Muhu



Today, the study and instruction of the Estonian traditional handicraft in the most authentic sense of the term is centred in the Viljandi Culture Academy's Department of National Handicraft. In addition to traditional women's handicraft, focused on various textile techniques, a brand new line of study into the field of traditional men's handicraft, that of vernacular construction, has emerged in Viljandi. Based on old methods of log-building and timber-crafting, these studies integrate ancient skills with modern principles of ecological construction, as well as with the regional approach towards Estonia's diverse construction heritage.



The programme of the Department strives to revive and make the old crafting techniques popular once again by training future schoolteachers and course instructors. The most gratifying 'target group' of all is the children, as they easily grasp the playfulness and joy of doing things that are essential components in sustaining any crafting tradition. The students' curriculum at the VCA thus includes practical training at a variety of crafting camps for children.

All in all, the students and graduates of the Academy are involved in an amazing number of innovative undertakings in Estonia, from providing the big music festivals with tradition-based decorations to compiling board games on the themes of Estonian crafting heritage.



In addition to the above, the networking of handicraft societies and a range of courses for all age groups is gradually picking up as well. In January 1992 the Estonian Folk Art and Craft Union was restored in Tallinn, and has since re-established branches all over the country. There is a training centre, and the National Costume Advisory Board has also sprung to new life.



Wood and splinters are the task of a man...

Modern commodities are often made of materials the names of which we have not even heard of, to say nothing of the manufacturing process. In peasant culture everything was clear and simple. The everyday craftwork done by men involved mainly making various wooden objects which were needed in a farmstead household. It was quite justified to call the long period until the mid-1800s in Estonia 'the era of wood'. The majority of wooden articles were tools and household utensils for daily use, and one needed them in remarkably large quantities.

Apart of certain traits in the collective mindset, such as a preference for solitude and a peculiar sense of humour, living in forests for thousands of years has endowed Estonians with a great deal of ingenuity in finding ways to overcome tricky problems imbedded in woodworking. As it is not easy, for example, to make wooden parts of any 'heavy-duty' artefact hold fast together, clever craftsmen used to take advantage of the natural shape of the piece of wood while making various goods and furniture articles, such as stools and pegs. Thus a fine branch could serve as a nozzle for a spout-mug or a tooth for a harrow, or a good root-stub could be used as an effective hinge for a gate or door. The results of this sort of ingenuity still abound Estonian summer cottages, saunas and pubs.



A branch of handicraft considered a truly ancient tradition in Estonia, is the craft of a cooper that uses several original craft techniques. Since in Estonian 'wooden' farm household the vessels made of staves were used for eating, washing, preserving foodstuffs and transporting various things, a cooper's skills were naturally highly valued. The best example of coopers' trade would be beer mugs, but a plethora of simpler and usually undecorated vessels, such as kegs, barrels, casks, churns, tubs, and so on should also be added here.



Vessels for beer

For Estonians, beer has been the favourite beverage for feasts and celebrations, and as a sacrificial drink that was offered to benevolent spirits and to ancestors. That could be one of the reasons for rich décor found on a number of types of vessels used for beer.



Although wooden, lidded steins are not typical of Estonia only – they are known also in Finland, Sweden and Latvia – those in the neighbouring countries are no match to Estonian ones, either in regard of size, or décor.



Küüt kann – on the northwestern coast and on the Western Islands, craftsmen made lidded mugs from lighter and darker alternating staves.

Old beer steins show an excellent harmony in form and are remarkably embellished. Both the lid and the handle are regularly decorated with notches, the handle often with a latticed wheel at the bottom end and a horse head on the top, with the sides done in pokerwork.



What exactly the triple steins were used for, remains something of a mystery

Double steins with two receptacles attached to the same handle, were produced for weddings. The bride and the groom had to drink from such a tricky mug together, without spilling a drop! Only thus could they secure a happy marriage for themselves.

Several festive mugs had a double bottom, which was filled with dry peas or pellets – when one topped such a mug, it made a rattling noise. A nice sound, but it also meant that nobody could have a drink in secret. On occasions where a larger amount of beer was consumed – which meant on most occasions – an important vessel was the *piipkann* ('pipe flagon'), a bulkier container with a long pipe-shaped spout. It was used to fetch beer from a vat and pour into steins. These were also decorated, but never to the same degree of richness as the drinking mugs.



Bending is another major technique in Estonian woodwork, used, in older times, when making shaft-bows for horse harnesses, sledge runners, wagon wheels and so on.

A different group of 'bent' artefacts, partly still in use today, are vessels made of thin curved boards – all kinds of items from small round boxes for food to the huge winnowing screens. These artefacts are uniquely typical to Northern Europe, as no technique utilised in their production shows evidence of a Central European influence.

Other elaborate wooden utensils were made as engagement or wedding presents. These included all the board-shaped distaffs and band-knives for weaving textile belts, and other practical tools carved by the bridegroom for his future wife. In addition to decorative, and probably magic patterns, the craftsman often carved the name of the recipient (*i.e.* the bride) and the date of the event into the gift. Although the custom is now virtually extinct, there are some rare examples of hand-carved engagement and wedding gifts from the 1950s and, rarer still, from the present day.



Ornated bridal box



Decorated courting gifts (19th c.)



Contemporary Estonians are still rather fond of wooden things. Having gone through the phase of polyester and plastic, they find that furniture made of genuine wood adds dignity to their homes.

And then again, a lot of Estonian men produce, either out of necessity or for the sheer pleasure of crafting, at least one wooden item during their lifetime, be it a boat or a spoon.



... dry goods and clothing are a woman's job



While wood- and metalwork are traditionally considered to be a male domain in the Estonian household, everything concerning textiles have been women's work. Although similarly to many other cultures, the professional weaving, dyeing and tailoring in the towns and manors was done by men in Estonia, this did not much concern Estonians, as less than a hundred and fifty years ago virtually all clothes for the peasant family were produced at home.

The only exception were some overgarments, such as longcoats and fur coats, which were ordered from the tailors and coat-makers.



In a peasant's household, only in the very first stages of the process of cloth- and garment-making – e.g. shearing sheep or processing flax – did men have a central part; after that, it was all upon women. And this was no easy task: in the 19th century, about eight lengths of cloth (each about 40 to 60 ell long, *i.e.* about 170–250 metres in all) per household were woven each year. Factory-made fabrics did not become more widely spread until the late 19th century.

Not surprisingly, then, it was textile work that proved to be one of the most resilient in the changing times: during the disappearance of rural handicraft in the early 20th century, for instance, it 'bestowed' numerous patterns of its artefacts to other fields of handicraft and the emerging applied art.

In the early 1900s, parallel to the dress of Estonian country folk changing according to urban fashions and style, some ideologists of the newly established Estonian nation started to talk about 'national costumes' and to promote their use.

The naturalistic flat-stitched floral design in Rococo style that had reached rural Estonian embroidery in the 17th century (although it did not spread to the southern parts of the country) has triggered all sorts of derivations up to the present day.



Such ideas met with a warm welcome among many Estonians, since under the double rule of the Russian tsar and Baltic German nobility, traditional costume was taken to symbolise national self-awareness and aspirations for self-determination.

Yet, there was an alternative approach present as well, with many urban Estonians subscribing to the idea of becoming Europeans, the faster the better and at any cost; this included giving up peasant clothing in favour of smart European urban attire. Combined with the gradual disappearance from the collective memory of the habit of wearing national costumes, the pursuit resulted in the 'everything goes with everything' attitude – by the 1920s, national costumes were rapidly degenerating into pseudo-national carnival dress.



Dancers of the mixed choir *Koit* from Viljandi (1930s)

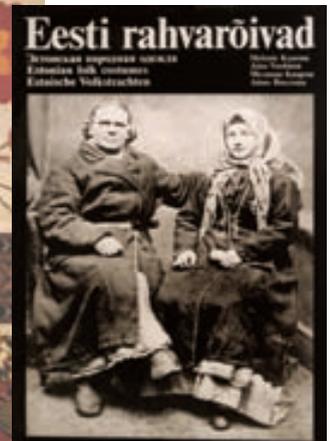
As a response, in the 1930s, textiles become one of the first handicraft branches to see the full-scale advent of 'scholarly folklorism'. Ethnologists who graduated from the newly Estonian-language Tartu University did their best to 'work out the proper versions of Estonian parish costumes'. Their efforts, epitomised by Helmi Kurrik's *Estonian National Costumes* (1938), managed to expel the most gross manifestations of ignorance, but at the same time sanctioned 'set descriptions' in a way comparable to that done with the Scottish Highlanders' 'clan tartans' by the Victorians. After WW II, the standardisation of national costumes was continued by the publication of several treatises with similar aims and titles, the most prominent of which – *Estonian National Costumes* by Melanie Kaarma and Aino Voolmaa – appeared in 1981.



Estonian National Costumes (1938)



(1981)





Textile work in general in the post-Second World War Soviet period survived and developed along its natural path, largely 'thanks' to the lean times. Hardships taught people to make something out of nothing, which is certainly an excellent accomplishment as well as being a significant feature to

distinguish Estonians from the population of the western European welfare states. The imagination of local people here as well as their frugal habits or the skill to put everything to use, gave remarkably fine results at tough times. A good illustration of this is any creative and discreet reinterpretation of the traditional costume pattern, cut or style.

Heathen people renowned by their blankets

Writing about the raid of the Teutonic crusaders against Estonians of *Haria* at the Loone stronghold (near modern Rapla) at Christmas 1223, the missionary chronicler *Henry of Livonia* reported:

.../ Meanwhile, the Germans sent a few of their host to the three smaller strongholds in the neighbourhood, threatening them with warfare if they did not deliver themselves into their hands. And the three strongholds surrendered to the Rigans,

sending them tributes and a lot of *waypa's* (*waypas quam plures*), during the same inroad. *.../*

There must have been a good reason for a foreign and hostile missionary to mention this fact, and, moreover, use the native word for blanket (*vaip* in modern Estonian) in doing so. Could it be that Estonians were already renowned for this type of textiles as long ago as in the 13th century?



Vaip continues to enjoy a remarkable eminent position on the cognitive maps of many Estonians – a venerated piece of textile work, it is considered a prestigious item of award on a range of occasions.



In Estonian village society, carriage and sleigh blankets for travelling to a wedding or church served as a status symbol. In the mid-1980s an old lady, known for her beautiful embroidery, told the museum people a lovely story. "I was quite young and sensitive in the time when embroidered coverlets became the height of fashion. Our house was so close to the church that we always went there on foot. Nobody could admire and praise the floral designs I had embroidered, because only a few had ever seen them at our house. One Christmas Eve I asked my husband to harness the horse. He gave me a weird look, wondering if I was suggesting that we should skip church. But I talked him into it and then spread the most beautiful blankets I had on the sleigh. Heavens, how all the women stared in awe and talked..."



West Estonian blanket has become the traditional *Grand Prix* of the Pärnu International Documentary and Anthropology Film Festival

Lap covers and travel wraps remained important and in use well into the 1930s, but at the same time bedspreads and rugs, followed by wall hangings gradually became more popular. The ornaments created by previous generations continued to serve as examples, but the form and function of the textiles had changed. Thus, it became fashionable in the 1920s to embroider patterns from the midriff blouse of women's folk costume on carpets, while textile belts with traditional ornaments were sewn together into wall hangings.





Estonian professional artists, too, have expressed their creativity in textiles throughout the last century.

A sequence of marvellous works from the 1915 *Ussikuningas* (Serpent King) by Oskar Kallis to the textiles by the late grand old lady Elgi Reemets, such as her depiction of the first Estonian professional singer, Aino Tamm (1977), do not fall into the category of national handicraft, but represent professional art in national style that has emerged from the same roots.



The latest feat along similar lines is the *Vapivaip* ('Coat of Arms') by Peeter Kuutma carpet studio, designed by Arne Mõttus, in the State Council Hall of the Presidential Palace in Kadriorg.



All in all, compared with men's jobs, the changed living environment in Estonia has treated women's handicraft much more sparingly. Carpets, bedcovers, and to a lesser extent tablecloths and kerchiefs are still woven on looms in some households, and the rug carpets made of long strips of worn-out clothing add cosiness to many a room.

Handymen of the Estonian village



The masters of a farmstead used to do everything themselves. He was a blacksmith and a carpenter, made his own barrels and kits, he also shod his horses and made iron runners for his sledges, hammered his ploughs and harrows, crafted his household utensils, spoons, plates, mugs, piggins, boxes and cupboards, built his houses and stoves, and so on, and so forth. A rare thing it is today to come across one man who can see to all these tasks. In rural districts we find all kinds of artisans more than ever...

Estonian daily *Postimees*, 1892



Iron jewellery by Heigo Jelle

Village artisans had in fact lived side by side with such industrious and skilful farmers for hundreds of years. The oldest and most respected among them was the job of a blacksmith – the village community usually sustained an artisan whose job was often passed on from father to son. Many farmers, though, did simpler metalwork at home: on the island of Saaremaa, for instance, the majority of farmsteads also included a tiny smithy.

The age of, and respect for, the blacksmith's profession is indicated by the fact that the Estonian terms for later artisans include the word *sepp* 'smith', such as in *puusepp* 'carpenter', *püttsepp* 'cooper', *kingsepp* 'shoemaker, cobbler', *rätsep* 'tailor', *värsisepp* 'poet, verse-wright', etc. A brightsmith's profession has usually been considered an urban artisanship, although there are notions of Estonian 'brooch-makers' and silversmiths in rural areas from the Middle Ages. However, they became ever rarer along with the deterioration of the status of Estonian peasantry. In the late 19th century – which is the period during which the majority of Estonian ethnographical collections were put together – it was only such tasks as casting simpler tin, brass and bronze decorations in moulds that were done mostly by peasants themselves or local blacksmiths.



Moulds for casting simple tin ornaments



Tool- and tar-makers of the backwoods

Estonia with its homogeneous agricultural traditions dating back many centuries did not exactly offer the most favourable conditions for the specialisation of rural artisans, or the establishment of separate handicraft centres. Almost everything needed in daily life and even on special occasions, such as weddings or christenings, was produced at home. Yet, some information on specialised craftsmen – such as carpenters and woodwork-artisans – in the Estonian countryside dates back to the sixteenth century.



Some two centuries later, a number of handicraft centres had developed in various richly forested areas and agriculturally unsuitable regions. The most important products of these, usually inland crafting centres, were wooden artefacts, duly exchanged for grain or fish or sold at the craft fairs. In the course of time, particular regions became known for the concentration of certain artisan specialities. For example, Avinurme in the great forests of Alutaguse in the North-East was famous all over Estonia for its wooden vessels that were traded far and wide, as was densely wooded Kõpu in Hiiumaa for its tar. The most renowned benders of shaft-bows were those of Laiksaare in Saarde (an area nicknamed 'the shaft-bow parish'), the best sledges and wagons were made in Valtu near Rapla and Välgi by Lake Peipsi was known for its sieve-makers.

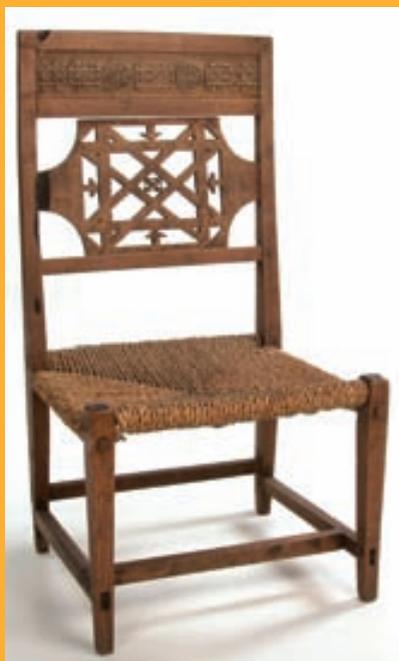


Avinurme, one of the most outstanding crafting centres at the end of the 19th century, is still going strong with a substantial number of inhabitants employed in woodcraft.



Muhu chair

The best-known chair-makers in Estonia came from the island of Muhu; their work was distinctive and evolved into a particular type of chair, which came to be known as *muhu tool* ('Muhu chair').



Originally a bridal chair – this piece of furniture became known among Estonian peasants, in the 18th century, in the form of a wedding gift to the bride on which she was seated during the ritual *tanutamine* ('capping of the bride'). The frame-chair provides a significant example of a transfer of motifs from the 'feminine crafts' to the 'masculine ones' – the ornament on the back-piece of a Muhu chair is a copy of the embroidery, but turned upside-down, on bride's wedding apron from the same island.

At the end of the 19th century, the peasantry, emerging both economically and intellectually from the tutelage of the manor, and gradually adopting the urban lifestyle, increasingly demanded more elaborate household goods produced by professional artisans. Cabinetmakers working in manor houses found new customers among richer peasants, as did makers of spinning wheels. Although some decades later, factory goods – both furniture and textiles – began driving out the hand-made items, many skills nevertheless survived amongst the people.



Shelf from the Kihnu Island

Most of Estonian boys are initiated into the basics of carpentry, including turning and simpler joining, already at technology lessons at primary school.

Woodwork classes at the Rocca-al-Mare School in Tallinn





Haanja pipe-carvers and hatters

Artisans of Haanja Upland in South Estonia, whose lands were too infertile and steeply sloped for farming and not sufficiently forested to allow them to pursue any timber-based handicraft, became skilled in making felt hats and pipes. The heyday of pipe-making having passed in the middle of the 19th century, there were about 40 pipe-makers still around in Haanja by the end of it.



Today there is no longer any pipe-carving in Estonia, but thanks to the enthusiasts of the Viljandi Culture Academy, folk art centres and elsewhere the tradition of making felt hats and other felting work has been successfully revived.



Felted logo of the Viljandi Folk Music Festival 2002

Potters

Unlike the Latvians and, even more so, Lithuanians, Estonians did neither manufacture nor utilise pottery during most of the last four hundred years or so. Instead of earthen- or stoneware, metal cooking pots together with lathe-turned or cooper-made wooden tableware and storage vessels were used.

Some sort of change arrived only in the second half of the 19th century, a period that witnessed the foundation of several large potteries in the Setu villages around Petseri (Pechory), that had the deposits of clay with satisfactory quality available nearby. It was from these pottery shops that the peddling *potisetud* ('Pot-Setus') obtained their goods – simple, scantily decorated bowls and cups – which they then sold or exchanged for rags for paper mills.



Meelis Krigul working in his pottery in Tuderna

In the footsteps of the Setu potteries of old, several clayshops together with the traditions of pottery fairs and peddlers' caravans have been revived in southeast Estonia.



When she strides, she clatters, when she travels, she twinkles, when she goes, she glistens

(runo-song from Mustjala on Saaremaa)

Of all the things that have survived from what previous generations have used, jewellery is among the most resilient to age. All around Estonia, archaeological excavations or farmers ploughing their fields keep unearthing pins or brooches or some other kind of adornments that have been buried in the ground for centuries. This kind of information offers a slight chance for scholars to learn about the taste canons of Estonians beyond the range of literary sources.

These pieces of cast, hammered and minted metal bear witness to the extensive and bustling trade network Estonia was involved in at the beginning of the second millennium AD. Boat rivets in the burials, Arabic coins and Oriental jewellery in the hoards, all relate to the traffic on the Neva–Volkhov–Volga waterway as well as the famous route ‘from the Varangians to the Greeks’ that took local sailors and oarsmen to the distant lands of the Great Bolgar, Constantinople and the Arab Khwarazm. After all, Northern Estonia ranks only second to the Island of Gotland, concerning the number of Arab coins found in a limited area in the whole Northern Europe.

Basso-relievo ‘Estonians’ on the console of the triumphal arch of the Karja Church

Certain types of ornaments were distinctive to particular nationalities in the 13th and 14th century Estonia. For instance, the persons depicted in the bas relief of the interior of the Karja Church – one of the earliest rural churches of Estonia – are thought to be the Estonians, judging by the conspicuous penannular brooches they are wearing.



Penannular brooches from Kostivere trove (early 13th century)





Estonian bride (oil, 1852)
by Gustav Adolf Hippius
(1792–1856)

Conical brooch
from the late 18th century



The share of silver and other metal ornaments in Estonian clothing has been diminishing ever since ancient times. The abundance of metal that lasted several centuries after the conquest – before the devastating wars of the 16th and 17th centuries the churches received large donations of money and jewellery not only from town-dwellers and the nobility, but also from wealthier peasants – gradually retreated into ever more remote regions, mostly as a result of the clothes becoming more ‘European’ and the general circumstances more miserable.

The German Enlightenment man of letters Johann Christoph Petri (1762–1851), describing the life of Estonian peasants in the early 19th century, found that the silver jewellery of the peasant women jingled so loudly that “it could be heard from afar as if a horse with sleigh bells was approaching.”



The Estonians who still continue to own considerable varieties of silver jewellery – including twined and meshed necklaces clearly showing the influence of the Orthodox church tradition – are the Setus in the remote south-east.

Unlike textiles and woodwork, jewellery of the Estonian peasants was usually made by professional artificers who quite often were not ethnic Estonians. In spite of the fact that the ornaments were mostly purchased or traded – the conical brooch and the flat brooch, for instance, both considered to be genuinely Estonian types of adornments, were ‘introduced’ by the non-Estonian guild jewellers in the 18th century – one is still justified to speak in terms of ‘Estonian-style jewellery’.



Richly decorated ring brooch bearing the name Michgel Vänkael ('Michael the Pigheaded') from 1587
Ring brooch with mauresque ornament (16th–17th cc.)

Aesthetic preferences naturally got mixed when the gold- and silversmiths had ideas of their own; it was however up to the client, a peasant woman or man, to accept or reject a design. It was that sort of practice that led to Estonian brooches being decorated with Medieval Gothic imagery, or with rich renaissance mauresques.

Strong traditionally, jewellery art today has managed to retain a lot of its originality and dignity in Estonia. Could this be explained by the fact that the designers and artisans have always been professionals?



Silver plate pendants from the Middle Ages



Kodarraha ('spoked coin' pendant) by M. W. Brackmann (1860s)



Ussikäevõru ('Serpent bracelet', 1981) by Tiitu Aru
Brooch *Minu Eestima* ('My Estonia', 1984) by Krista Laos

The heritage of the Medieval craft guilds

The formation of craft guild organisations, in Estonian towns called the trades, dates back to the end of 14th century. The first trades to receive the statutes – *scraa* – in Tallinn were the tailors (1363–75), the goldsmiths (1393) and the butchers (1394).

Already in the 15th–16th centuries, the Germans began restricting the access of craftsmen of other nationalities to the more prestigious guilds – those for goldsmiths, shoemakers, tailors, hatters, etc. Estonians and other non-Germans had to be content with lower status guild professions – masons, stone-dressers, coopers, carpenters, weavers, sail-makers, hemp-twisters, etc. The majority of urban Estonians, however, could not rise any higher than what were known as 'lesser trades' outside the craft guilds.



The statutes of the St Canute's Guild of Tallinn (16th c.)

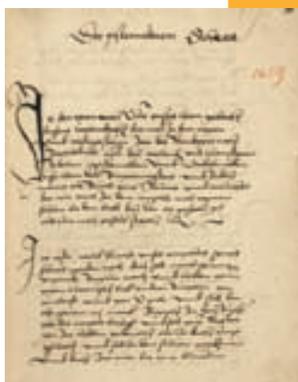
The sources of Estonian leatherwork



Tobacco pouch with relief ornament from the 19th century

Highly professional leatherwork is considered creative art that has brought well-earned recognition to Estonian artists. Through the whole period when we can talk of handicraft in national style, Estonians have cherished leather bookbinding, wallets, boxes, and even jewellery or wall decorations.

It is still commonly considered that leatherwork is one of the most distinguished 'traditional' souvenirs available in Estonia. Yet, were one to search for the roots of this craft, there is not much to be found in the peasant tradition. To date, just a few richly decorated knife sheaths, game bags and tobacco pouches have survived.



Transcript of the statutes of Pistelmakers Guild of Tallinn (1459)

Although leatherwork has doubtlessly been one of the most common tasks for the Estonian peasantry, it never developed into professional artisanship.

The origin of Estonian leatherwork is firmly in towns, in the trade of *pistelmakers* (Estonian-German compound word for 'stitch-maker') – artisans of largely Estonian origin who provided a variety of embellished belts, harnesses and other kinds of leatherwork, as well as simpler jewellery to the townspeople and the peasantry of the countryside. As members of the saddlers' guild, they are mentioned in the town documents up to the Early Modern Age.



Tin pendants for decorating dresses – typical merchandise of *pistelmakers*

Competitors on the market, the craftsmen and traders of Estonian origin became quite a nuisance for the German guild authorities. In the early 16th century Tallinn, for instance, the burghers demanded that the non-German small dealers and *pistelmakers* be chased with dogs from the market and replaced by 'civil' traders from Germany.

It is not known whether their grievances were met, but *pistelmakers* disappear from the written sources during the 17th century, and the Estonian-run professional leatherworking does not surface again before the end of 19th century.

The professional discrimination was not confined only to the towns. As urban gold- and silversmiths made a good profit by selling *Bauernsilber* (German for 'peasant silver') to the country people, they did everything in their power to stop 'illegal' (i.e. not guild members) artisans who worked at the manor houses and other rural centres.



Master's certificate of Tallinn's Potters' Guild awarded to Wolmer Otto (1875)

Guild-based handicraft regulations persisted in Estonian towns, almost unchanged, until the end of the 18th century. It was the new trades regulation imposed by the Russian Imperial Town Law of 1785 that started to curb the monopoly held by the German guild masters in the principal fields of handicraft – henceforth every artisan had the right to practice his trade.

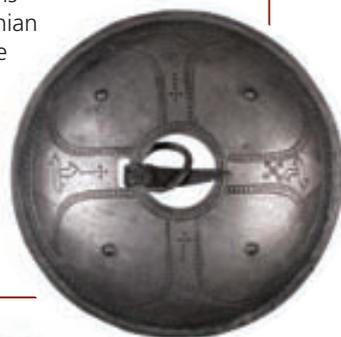
The final blow for the 'old order' was dealt in 1866 with the abolition of all craft guild privileges, which led to the gradual disintegration of the rest of these organisations.

The last craft guilds, though, continued to exist well into the 20th century, when they were gradually taken over by Estonians or turned into a kind of social welfare organisations for the retired craftsmen.

The *Triskelion-master*

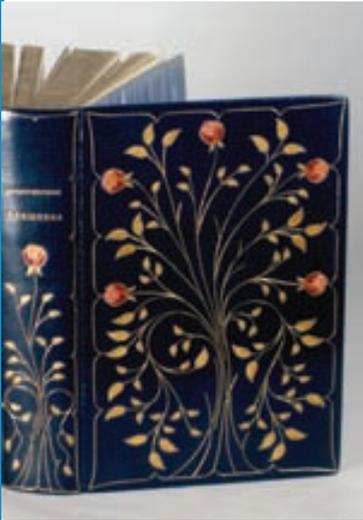
Since Estonians were still called neophytes in the 18th century, it is no wonder that the 16th–17th century peasant adornments, e.g. the twelve brooches of the *Triskelion-master* series, found in West Estonia, boast symbols belonging in the pre-conquest period.

Having operated in the mid-16th century, the *Triskelion-master* is presumed to be Estonian mostly because of the unique, half-pagan décor of his brooches that completely differed from the urban varieties of the time.



Tobacco plate of the apprentices of the Tallinn Coopers' Guild (1811)

The birth of the Estonian applied art



Bookbinding by Mihkel Ulemann (around 1900)



Siurulind ('Wonderbird') from the cycle *Kalevipoeg* by Oskar Kallis (designed 1915, woven 1997)

Urbanisation and the concomitant rapid changes in society had created the preconditions for the emergence of professional Estonian fine and applied art by the early 20th century. As local German master artisans

were often less than pleased to share their trade secrets with their socially inferior co-citizens, Estonians chose to go and study abroad: in St Petersburg, several applied art schools in Germany, etc.



Ceramic duck by Juuli Suits
Embroidered textiles by Vanda Juhasoo



Products of the State Arts and Crafts School

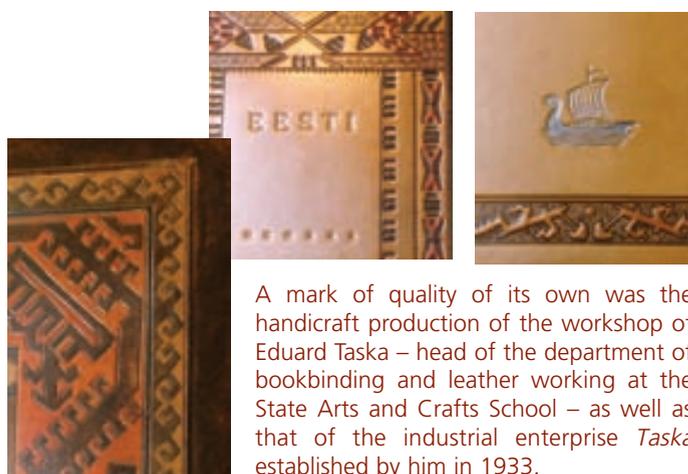


A number of the great names of early Estonian national applied art – e.g. Vanda Juhasoo, Juuli Suits, Alma Koskel, Anni Varma – who started out establishing handicraft courses and schools in the early 20th century, had received their education at the Helsinki *Ateneum* art school in Finland. In addition to such direct influences, the general inspiration provided by Estonia's kindred nation across the Gulf of Finland whose 'national awakening' had occurred somewhat earlier, was of essential importance.

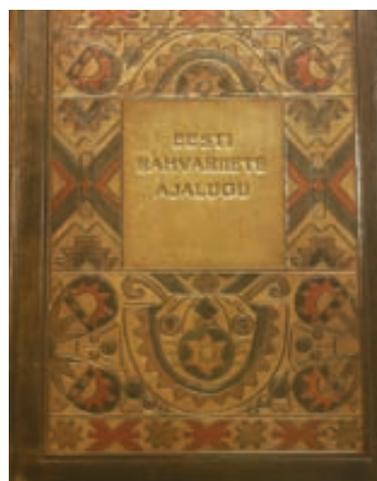
Inevitably, the existing trade-related and workshop-based instruction was gradually replaced by public applied art schooling: 1914 saw the establishment of the Tallinn Arts and Crafts School that taught leatherwork, bookbinding, decorative painting and sculpture, graphic art and printing, textile art, ceramics, metal and glass art. Re-named the State Arts and Crafts School in 1924, it had soon acquired a central role in the instruction of nearly every field of applied arts practised in or introduced to Estonia.

Along with the establishment of Estonian-language university programmes of ethnology and folklore, the 1920s saw the nation-wide encouragement of the National Romanticist style applied art that would rely on 'original Estonian motifs'.

This was accompanied by an unprecedented interest on the part of leading Estonian artists in creating fancy sketches and designs for all areas of (applied) art and handicraft, from furniture design to leatherwork. What is more, they did this without having the slightest worry about their reputation as professional architects, painters or sculptors.



A mark of quality of its own was the handicraft production of the workshop of Eduard Taska – head of the department of bookbinding and leather working at the State Arts and Crafts School – as well as that of the industrial enterprise *Taska* established by him in 1933.



Estonian applied art as a whole, as well as its teaching, reached a new level in the 1930s. Besides the crafts that had been copying the vanishing original folk art and had borrowed its motifs (the first Estonian union of applied artists of 1928 was called, rather indicatively, *Decor*), a fully professional 'expressive applied art' emerged, and in 1932 the most influential organisation of the innovators, the Association of Applied Artists (RaKÜ), was founded.

An excellent example of the new wave of applied art with elements of Functionalism and Art Déco is the versatile oeuvre of Adamson-Eric (Erich Karl Hugo Adamson). From the 1920s on, his numerous works in a highly personal style and various fields of applied art – textile, metal and leather art, ceramics – continued to reflect the development in the field in Estonia during more than forty years.



Hand-painted china by Adamson-Eric (1937)





The annexation of Estonia in 1940 soon brought with it the nationalisation of the applied arts' schools and studios and the adjustment of the instruction to the canons of Soviet ideology. The spirit of the times was well expressed at the opening ceremony of the Tallinn State Applied Arts Institute in 1944, where the delegate of the Estonian Communist Party made clear that: "... creating real works of art in our socialist society is only possible by mastering and fully grasping the party's teaching."



The times of political repressions from the end of 1940s to the beginning of 1950s were the toughest test of all for the fledgling Estonian applied arts. Direct persecution of several leading artists accused of 'formalism' and 'nationalism', accompanied with the propagation of vacuous 'socialist internationalism', did not cease until the death of Stalin in 1953.

Evidently, however, the established traditions proved to be strong enough to maintain Estonia among the strongest applied arts centres in the Soviet Union and the whole of Northern Europe, this with regard to the number as well as the high standard of the taught subjects, such as ceramics, glass-, metal-, leatherwork and artistic textile. Besides local students, numerous applied artists from Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova and other 'republics' of the Soviet Union acquired their education at the Estonian State Art Institute formed in 1951 from several higher art educational establishments.



ARS

Three decades from the pre-war boom of Estonian applied art and crafts, ‘the Khrushchev Thaw’ in the Soviet establishment made it possible for Estonian artists and crafts masters to make another attempt along similar lines. Under the auspices of the newly established Association of Master-Artists *ARS*, various items of jewellery and other artefacts were produced, and these have later come to be regarded as classics.

Unlike the national handicraft *par excellence* cultivated at *UKU*, the *ARS* products were more focused on the artist – the small number of copies did not rely so much on traditional ornamentation and topics.

Yet, neither were the products of *ARS* quite spared from the influence by folk art that at times materialised in a rather surprising manner. An exciting example here is the metamorphosis of the grapevine motif of the medieval stone carvings through the ‘strawberry-twig ornament’ on the back of a peasant’s chair on to the clothes clasp made in *ARS*.



Jewellery model made by Heinz Valk for *ARS*

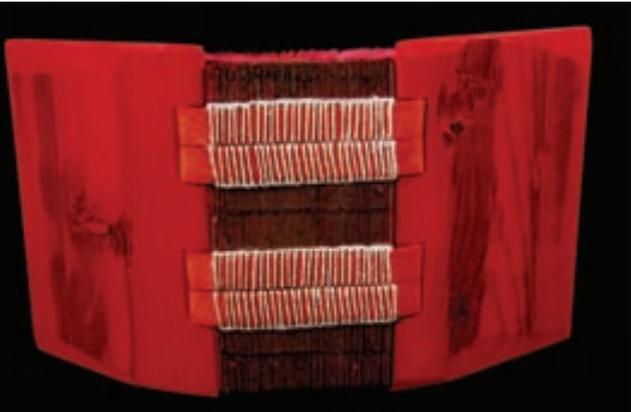
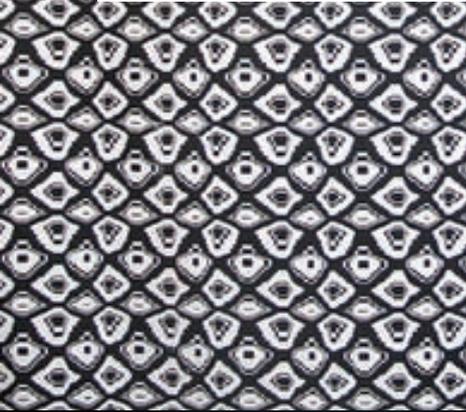
Quite new perspectives for the instruction and practice of applied arts opened with the restoration of the Republic of Estonia in 1991. Already the first years of independence saw the (re-)establishment of several centres of study, as well as intense contacts with neighbouring countries and beyond.

In 2000, after an interval of almost half a century, higher applied art education

returned to Tartu with the founding of Tartu Art College. An important centre for applied art studies in today’s Estonia, concerning methods of work, applications of techniques and general ideology, TAC has adopted an approach close to that of the Arts and Crafts movement and the *Bauhaus*: functionality and regard for material should be given as much attention as the form.



One of the many ancient skills in danger of oblivion in Estonia that the staff and students of the TAC have thought worthwhile to revive, is the Oriental method of hand-block printing of fabric.



Bookbinding by Lennart Mänd

In addition to the above, the nearly one-hundred-years-old Estonian academic art teaching tradition has once again turned to research scientifically its peasant 'prehistory'. The newly-established (2002) Chair of Traditional Art at the EAA sees its aim in "... researching our heritage as a source of inspiration and examining its function in the framework of the modern art discourse."

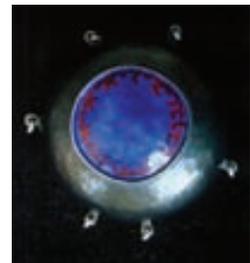


Glasswork by Eeva Käsper-Lennuk



Tradition-inspired jewellery by Kärt Summatavet, head of the EAA's Chair of Traditional Art

This is hardly surprising, in our times of unprecedented hodgepodge of ideologies, especially when one realises that the subconscious of the predominantly second or third generation townspeople of Estonia still largely associates with fixed residence, particular locality and Estonia in general. Hence the occasionally surfacing interest of modern applied artists in their one-time heritage – the language of form, symbols and emblems of their rural ancestors.





Laundry bat carved by Iohan Hältring (1880)



Kiri – patterns and writing

Estonian traditional folk art lacks lush decorativeness, forceful dominance or playfulness of form and decoration, so typical of many other nations. On the other hand, there is no naivety either, something considered so characteristic to folk art.

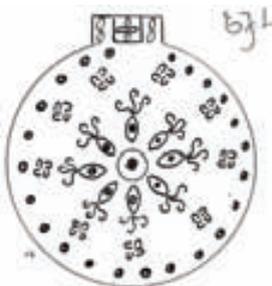
A typical feature of the creative activity of this nation is an urge to *kirjata* 'to compose a pattern'. Throughout centuries people have used the Estonian term *kiri* 'writing' instead of the borrowed *muster* 'pattern' or *ornament*.

Ornaments cut onto the lids of Estonian beer mugs



In ancient times, belt patterns were thought so powerful that they would protect you against the evil eye and a number of maladies related to witchcraft, including a snakebite.

In the 17th century, when the new rulers of Estonia, local administrators of the Protestant Kingdom of Sweden, opened schools for peasant Estonians, an alternative meaning of 'writing' started to take over. At these schools people learned to write digits and letters, and to compose numbers and words from them. That was a new system where every sign counted in order to convey a particular meaning; on the other hand, letters had to be grouped in correct sequences to render an idea, in most cases a single letter remained meaningless.





Farm-marks on the floats of the fishing net

Apparently a farm-mark, a symbol traditionally marking ownership, conveyed a considerably larger amount of information. An owner's mark such as this, represented the whole family and the magic sign contained quite a particular power. These marks provided the user with strength and good health, protected against evil, and, in addition, quite simply looked pretty as an ornament or decoration.



Carved patterns on a wooden box for textiles

First, when school education spread, Estonians started to write and read in two ways: writing based on the alphabet and writing based on traditional symbols. Yet, as time went on, the alphabet, richer in signs, gradually gained the upper hand. And along with that, signs and symbols changed; with the arrival of the new, linear writing, the old way of reading inevitably moved into the background, and the knowledge of the meaning of old *kiri* faded.

Pen-and-Pencil box: 'old patterns' decorating a case for keeping tools used for producing 'new patterns'.

An essential role in the substitution of the old way of writing with the new one was played by the Moravian Brethren – a movement of religious awakening originating from Herrnhut in Saxony, which began to spread among Estonian peasants in the 1730s. It is possible that it was only this movement that truly awakened many Estonians to the actual acceptance of the Christian faith.



Wooden masks for Martinmas celebrations (19th c.)



Eucharist cloth with Baroque embroidery from the Tarvastu church (middle 18th c. or earlier)

Unfortunately for the ancient traditions, though, the freshly found religious zeal was often manifested in neglecting and actively rooting out everything 'pagan', be it folk poetry or traditional music, or 'vain', such as national costumes or household artefacts decorated with ancient ornaments. In their stead, the Brethren encouraged the spread of psalm singing, plain clothes and pious written culture among the peasants.

While there are numerous historical accounts of sacred objects and places – statues of fertility spirits, sacrificial stones and gardens, and other places of worship – in Estonian peasant households, by the mid-19th century, the efforts of the Moravian Brethren and the Pietist Lutheran clergy to eradicate every heathen or semi-heathen phenomenon from the minds of their countrymen was bearing results.

Estonians, too, started to consider services in church or sermons in the meeting house to be the only acceptable forms of worship and the last remnants of the probably pre-Christian *pühasenurk* ('sacred corner' – a kind of home altar in the opposite corner from a stove) disappeared from the peasants' living rooms. Together with the retreat of 'the sacral' from everyday life, the knowledge of the meaning of protective and auspicious signs and symbols faded.



"Mull meeles seisab alati mu kallis kodumaa" ("My beloved Homeland is always on my mind") – 'mnemonic' wall decoration from the National Awakening period

The sacral corner with its *kibot* (icon cupboard) and sacrament linen survived longest in the houses of the Orthodox Setu people.



By the time the Estophile Baltic Germans and later the first Estonian linguists and ethnographers began taking an interest in the old writings of the county people, they were often presented with 'popular' pseudo-interpretations instead of the genuine traditional meanings. Provided the scholars' 'new-way-of-writing' background and their informants' 'old-way-of-writing' background would have allowed for any reciprocal understanding at all.

Yet, even when the original meaning has vanished into oblivion, the messages hidden in the shaping beauty and decorations still render a sense of something mystical. The same way as feelings expressed through song in a foreign tongue can still charm and impress a listener, even one who is unable to understand the meaning of the words.



Patterning felt at the Tartu Art College

The saying of our forefathers, "*Südan ei saa sundida*" ("The human heart cannot be forced"), tells a lot about Estonians' doggedness when it comes to the question of freedom of choice and preference – the people of this country continue to look toward both the museum and the wider world for inspiration. Hopefully, this healthy attitude is not on the wane.





Map by Krista Mölder
Map data courtesy of Regio Ltd.



Published by the Estonian Institute
2004



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